

## Stories of Hope: Autism



Brandon's dad noticed it first. "He won't look at me," Jonathan Knepher told his wife, Lauren Forman, as they admired their 18-month-old son. "Why won't he look at me?"

Forman hadn't noticed it herself. Brandon looked at her. "What do you mean?" she asked, and then watched as her husband tried to draw their son's attention. "Oh my gosh!" Brandon would not look.

It was the first suggestion that their son had autism. Today, **Brandon Knepher** knows how to look at Dad. He is close to his family, Mom says, including his two younger sisters, Jady and Morgan.

"The biggest challenge is with other people," Forman says. Outsiders expect Rain Man-like skills. They gawk. They judge. "When we're walking around and he's aching and oohing, people stare at him," Forman says. "How does that make him feel?"

He is nonverbal. Behavior the family recognizes as communication, others see as acting out.

The whole view of autism needs to change, she says. "People need to realize this isn't a psychological disorder. These kids aren't mentally ill. These children are physically sick."

Stem cell research will not only help find treatments for autism, it will help everyone adjust their notions of autism, she says. "I think it's going to revolutionize a lot," she says. "It will revolutionize the way we look at disease. It's going to change our perspective."

- Watch talks from the CIRM Workshop on Autism, Toxicology, Environmental Health and Stem Cell Science
- Read about CIRM funding for Autism research

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